

Kings and Queens of Mercia

by Ben Johnson

Mercia was one of the great seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England, alongside East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Northumbria, Sussex and Wessex. Based around its capital of Tamworth, Mercia went through rapid expansion throughout the 6th and 7th centuries to be one of the 'big three' kingdoms of England along with Northumbria and Wessex.

In this article, we outline the many Kings and Queens of Mercia from Icel in the early 500's all the way through to Ælfwynn in 918 who annexed the kingdom to Wessex.

ICEL (also spelt Icil) c. 515 – c. 535

Although some sources argue that Creoda was the first true king of Mercia, we're fairly certain this title should be given to Icel. Icel was the son of Eomer (of Beowulf fame), the last king of the Angles in northern Germany. Icel was responsible for leading an army of Angles onto the British mainland at East Anglia, and defeating the local Britons into submission.

By 527 he had worked his way through East Anglia and onto Mercia, as is reported in the *Flores Historiarum*:

"Pagans came from Germany and occupied East Anglia, that is, the country of the East Angles; and some of them invaded Mercia, and waged war against the British."

By his death in 535, it is reported that Icel held large swathes of both East Anglia and Mercia, and therefore could be considered the first true king of Mercia.

CNEBBA c. 535 – c. 545

As with many of the kings of Mercia, little is known about Cnebba. He was the only son of Icel and is reported only have ruled for around 10 years following his father's death. Contrary to popular belief, he was not born in Tamworth Fortress (not to be mistaken for Tamworth Castle) as this was not constructed until the end of the 6th century by Cnebba's grandson, Creoda.

CYNEWALD c. 545 – c. 580

Literally nothing is known about Cynewald, son of Cnebba, not even how long he ruled for!

CREODA c. 580 – c. 595



Argued by some to be the first true king of Mercia, Creoda was perhaps the first of the Angle kings to *securely* hold the region of Mercia. What is also likely is that during the previous 50 years, his ancestors had found it increasingly difficult to hold both their last remaining vestiges of East Anglia as well as Mercia. As such, Creoda may have decided to cede the remaining eastern parts of his kingdom to King Wuffa (another Angle invader who had interests in the area) in order to better defend the smaller area of Mercia. It is also important to remember that during these times of constant seaborne invasions, an inland territory such as Mercia would be easier to defend than a coastal territory such as East Anglia.

PYBBA c. 595 – c. 606

This 'busy' king was said to have had 12 sons and a daughter (although we're betting not all by the same woman!). Details about Pybba are sketchy and conflicting, but what is known is that he successfully expanded the Mercian kingdom westwards towards modern day Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

CEARL c. 606 – c. 625

Named by many sources as the king of Mercia during this time (including in *Bede's Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* and Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*), Cearl was not actually part of the Mercian royal family. It is not known what his relationship was to Pybba, or even why he took the throne after his death. What is known is that Cearl quickly became impatient of Mercia's subjugation by its larger and powerful neighbour, the kingdom of Northumbria. This came to a head when Cearl was rumoured to have taken part in the Battle of Chester, siding with local British tribes against Æthelfrith of Northumbria. Some scholars argue that when the British (and possibly Mercians) were defeated at the Battle of Chester, it effectively ended Cearl's reign and opened the way for Pybba's son to retake the throne.

PENDA c. 625 – 15th November 655



Son of Pybba, Penda realigned the Mercian throne with the original Icel dynasty. This battle hungry king is remembered for turning Mercia from a second-rate kingdom to the most powerful in England, overtaking the likes of both Wessex and Northumbria. Perhaps the most famous battles that Penda led were the Battle of Cirencester (taking the Severn Valley from Wessex) and the Battle of Hatfield Chase (defeating Edwin of Northumbria, effectively collapsing the kingdom in the process).

His most prestigious victory was against a reunited Northumbria at the Battle of Maserfield, nine years after his success at Hatfield Chase. This victory was to confirm the Mercians as the leading kingdom in England. During the years that followed, Penda continued fighting both Wessex and East Anglia to secure even more lands for Mercia.

Unfortunately this success was not to last, and at the Battle of Winaed in 655 Penda was finally defeated by a resurgent Northumbrian army. This battle was important for three reasons; firstly, it restored Northumbrian dominance over the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England. Secondly, Penda's defeat broke the Mercian kingdom into two. Thirdly, Penda was the last of the Anglo-Saxon kings to have rejected Christianity over Paganism. His defeat effectively marked the demise of Anglo-Saxon paganism, something that would never be restored.

PEADA OF MERCIA (Southern Mercia) 655 – 656

OSWIU OF NORTHUMBRIA (Northern Mercia) 655 – 658



Following the defeat of Penda at the Battle of Winaed, Mercia effectively fell under the control of Northumbria. The northern part of the kingdom fell under direct control of Oswiu of Northumbria (pictured to the right), whilst the southern part of the kingdom fell to Penda's son, Paeda, as a form of 'puppet government'. Paeda's rule was to be short lived however, as he was 'wickedly' killed by his own wife during Easter celebrations.

Oswiu of Northumbria ruled over northern Mercia for three years until in 658 three Mercian noblemen banded their armies together and drove him out. Penda's son, Wulfhere, subsequently ascended to the Mercian throne and restored control over the kingdom.

WULFHERE 658 – 675

The first Christian king of Mercia, Wulfhere was a similar ruler to his father, Penda. Upon his succession to the throne, he quickly reinstated Mercian power over southern Britain and invaded territories as far south as the Isle of Wight. Strangely, once he had successfully captured large portions of south Britain he subsequently handed control over to smaller, local kingdoms such as Sussex. He was likely seeking to establish hegemony in the area, as he did not have the manpower to establish and maintain direct control over an extended period. Unlike his father however, Wulfhere never managed to retake any parts of Northumbria (although he gave it a bloody good go in 674!). Wulfhere died of disease in 675.

ÆTHELRED I 675 – 704



Another son of Penda, Æthelred was a pious and staunchly religious king. He married Oswiu of Northumberland's daughter, and after a hard fought battle with her brother, Ecgfrith, in 679, managed to secure and fix the Mercian border with Northumbria to the line of the River Humber. The drawing of this border effectively put an end to any future incursions by Northumbria.

To the south, Æthelred took a much more laissez-faire approach to what was happening. The only obvious exception was a short invasion of Kent in 676, to shore up the claim of another king in the area.

After his wife was murdered in 697, Æthelred continued to rule for another seven years before abdicating the throne. He subsequently became a monk at one of the many monasteries he and his wife had set up, and died some years later.

COENRED 704 – 709

Son of Wulfhere, the likelihood is that Cænred was simply too young to succeed to the throne on his Father's death, hence the succession of his uncle Æthelred instead. However, on Æthelred's abdication in 704, Cænred finally came into power. His short reign was blighted by numerous Welsh incursions into western Mercia, and he eventually abdicated in 709. He ended his years in Rome, and like his uncle became a monk.

CEOLRED 709 – 716

King Cænred never married nor had any children, so on his abdication the throne was given to Æthelred's son, Ceolred. Not much is known about Ceolred, but it is suggested that he was extremely unpopular with the Church. In fact, in a letter written by St. Boniface to Cænred's successor, Æthelbald, he accused the king of *"the violation and seduction of nuns and the destruction of monasteries"*. He died at a feast, probably by poisoning.

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ÆTHELBALD 716 – 757

Æthelbald was Ceolred's cousin, and is widely acknowledged as one of the strongest kings of Mercia. In fact, by the early 730's he had effective overlordship of the entirety of England south of the Humber. This included the powerful kingdoms of Wessex and Kent. After a long reign, Æthelbald was eventually murdered in 757 by his own bodyguards, although the reason for this is not known. Today he is buried in a crypt in the village of Repton, South Derbyshire.

BEORNRED 757

Poor old Beornred... no-one even knows how he came to power (he was no apparent relation to any of the kings before him)! *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* writes that Beornred succeeded Æthelbald to the throne, but that he held it *"but a little while, and unhappily and unprosperously; for King Offa the same year put him to flight, and assumed the government, and held it 39 years..."*

OFFA 757 – 29th July 796



Much like Æthelbald, Offa was both a strong and enduring king, as well as being renowned for his overwhelming lust for power. During his 39

year reign he reaffirmed Æthelbald's claim to the south of England and built his famous 140 mile dyke along the Welsh border to fortify Mercia against any future Welsh incursions. Offa is often regarded as one of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kings to have ever lived. [Read more about Offa here.](#)

ECGFRITH 29th July – 17th December 796

Son of Offa, Ecgfrith ruled for only 141 days before reputedly being assassinated. As the Alcuin of York wrote to a close friend: *"The noble youth did not die through his own sins, I believe; it was the vengeance of the father's blood that fell upon the son."*

COENWULF December 796 – 821



After the death of Ecgfrith, there were no direct heirs or successors to the Mercian throne. Instead, the crown went to Coenwulf, a descended of a brother of King Penda.

Coenwulf is remembered as being the last king of Mercia to hold dominance across the south of England. He put down numerous rebellions, such as a revolt in Kent by a would-be king called Eadberht Præn. Unfortunately for Eadberht, this uprising was quickly quashed and as a punishment for his treason he was blinded and had some of his limbs dismembered!



CEOLWULF I 821 – 823

After the death of Coenwulf in 821, the throne was handed to his brother, Ceolwulf. Unfortunately Ceolwulf didn't have a very good time at it, and is now known as the king that ushered in the beginning of the Mercian decline. As William of Malmesbury, a prominent historian in the 12th century, wrote: *"...the kingdom of the Mercians declining, and, if I may use the expression, nearly lifeless, produced nothing worthy of historical commemoration."*

What is worth noting is that Ceolwulf did, in fact for a time at least, take large swathes of the kingdom of Powys from the Welsh and subsequently brought them under Mercian control.

Ceolwulf I was deposed in 823 by a relative unknown called Beornwulf.

BEORNWULF 823 – 826

It would be an understatement to say that Beornwulf wasn't the most successful of Mercian kings. In fact, Beornwulf is probably the single most important reason why the kingdom of Mercia, after 200 years as the 'top dog', became a second rate kingdom once again.

The Battle of Ellandun in 825 was the turning point, when Beornwulf decided to attack the king of Wessex in an area that is now just outside Swindon. He was defeated, and as a consequence the Mercian sub-kingdoms of Essex and Sussex switched sides to Wessex.

To make matters worse, the king of Wessex then decided to invade Kent and subsequently drove out the pro-Mercian king out of the area.

Seeing these events, the East Angles also decided to switch sides, leaving the Mercian kingdom without any of the territories that it had slowly annexed over the previous 200 years. Beornwulf was understandably not very happy with this turn of events, and quickly headed with his army to East Anglia to crush the revolt; he was killed in the process.

LUDECA 826 – 827

Not much is known about Ludeca, not even how he came to power or what his relationship was to the Mercian royal family. What is known is that a year after his predecessor was killed attempting to subjugate the East Angles, Ludeca went back to try again. Once again, he was killed in the process.

WIGLAF 827 – 839



Thought to be a distant relative of Penda, Wiglaf ruled Mercia for twelve interesting years. The first half of his reign saw the entire Mercian kingdom defeated and under the control of the king of Wessex, Egbert. The second half of his reign saw Wiglaf fight back, recover his kingdom, and even manage to reclaim Berkshire and large parts of Essex. By the time Wiglaf died in 829, things were looking up for the Mercian kingdom once again... but was it to last?

WIGMUND 839 – 840

It is thought that once Wiglaf died, that he succeeded by his son Wigmund. Unfortunately nothing more than this is known.

WIGSTAN 840

Much like his father Wigmund, nothing much is known about Wigstan. What we do know is that he possibly ruled over Mercia for a very short period of time before being murdered by his successor, Beorhtwulf. He also may have co-ruled with his mother, Ælfflæd.

BEORHTWULF 840 – 852

Claiming the throne due to his presumed ancestry to Beornwulf (king of Mercia 823 – 826), Beorhtwulf's first order of business was to marry his predecessor's (Wigstan's) mother off to his own son! Over his twelve years on the throne, Beorhtwulf witnessed the first of the Viking raids on British soil. In 842 the Vikings sacked London (at that time still under Mercian control), and again in 851. However, the later attack forced Beorhtwulf to react, and as his forced reclaimed London it pushed the Viking invaders southwards, out through Southwark and into Wessex territory. Once in Wessex territory, the much more powerful king Æthelwulf swiftly defeated them.

It is thought that these early Viking invasions brought the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex much closer together, in order to defeat their common enemy.

BURGRED 852 – 874

The last true independent king of Mercia, Burgred's relatively long reign was blighted by regular Viking invasions. Starting almost immediately after taking the throne, Burgred was forced to ally up with Ethelwulf of Wessex in order to counter attacks from both the Welsh in the west and the Vikings in the east.

Although Burgred was successful in halting any invasions for almost 20 years, the 'March of the Danes' in 874 ultimately proved too much for him to repel and he was subsequently defeated and expelled from the Mercian kingdom. Burgred then retired to Rome where he later died.

CEOLWULF II 874 – 883

After the Vikings had successfully driven Burgred from Mercia, they moved to install their own puppet king to administer the kingdom. As the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle writes, "*[The Danes] gave Ceolwulf, an unwise king's thane, the Mercian*

kingdom to hold; and he swore oaths to them, and gave hostages, that it should be ready for them on whatever day they would have it; and he would be ready with himself, and with all those that would remain with him, at the service of the army."

By the end of his reign in 883, Ceolwulf was thought to have also lost the eastern parts of Mercia to direct Danish-Viking control. Even the lands that he still held to the west and south were effectively sub-kingdoms of Danelaw, and therefore should not be considered a strictly 'independent' Mercia.

ÆTHELRED II 883 – 911

With increasing amounts of eastern Mercia coming under Danish-Viking control, Æthelred II decided to break ties with Danelaw and instead form an alliance with King Alfred of Wessex. However, this alliance was not a marriage of equals, and as part of the agreement Æthelred had to effectively cede Mercia to Wessex as a sub-kingdom and promise loyalty to King Alfred. To seal the pact, he also married Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd.

Luckily this alliance proved beneficial for the Anglo Saxons, as with Alfred's help Mercia was able to reclaim the majority of its eastern kingdom back from the Danish.



LADY ÆTHELFLÆD 911 – 12th June 918

After Æthelred II's death in 911, the lordship of Mercia fell to his wife (who also happened to be the daughter of King Alfred of Wessex). Lady Æthelflæd was a keen military strategist, and carried out repeated attacks both against the Danish in the north-east and the Welsh in the west.

LADY ÆELWYNN 918

On the death of her mother, Æthelflæd, in 918, Ælfwynn assumed the throne of Mercia. However, this was not to last, as within a few weeks her uncle, King Edward the Elder of Wessex, rode into Mercia and effectively deposed her. Of course, by this time Mercia was essentially a sub-kingdom of Wessex so Edward knew that he would face little to no resistance. As the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states, *"the daughter of Æthelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all dominion*

over the Mercians, and carried into Wessex, three weeks before mid-winter; she was called Ælfwynn."

This deposition marked the end of an independent or autonomous Mercia, and instead marked the beginning of what we now know as the kingdom of England.



Edward the Elder